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A NEW PLAY TWO THOUSAND YEARS OLD: “THE TRACKERS,” A SATYRIC DRAMA, BY SOPHOCLES

TO be exact, it is more than two thousand years old; for Sophocles died 402 B.C., which is 2,313 years ago. In his advanced years he had been summoned before a family court by his son Iophon on a charge of disordered intellect. The aged poet's defence was as beautiful as it was effective. He simply recited the encomium on Colonus from the “*Oedipus Coloneus*,” which he had just completed. The charge, of course, was dismissed.

Sophocles introduced the third actor into Greek drama, thus adding to the life and movement of the play. His plots are tragic webs, subtle and effective; his language supple, and eloquent of poetry and of passion. In Byzantine times the “*Ajax*”, “*Electra*” and “*Oedipus Tyrannus*” were the most popular of his seven plays still extant, for of his 123 dramas only seven had survived. Now an eighth has been discovered, not a tragedy, but one showing him in an entirely new light, the discovery consisting of fragments of one of the Satyric plays by which it was wont to end each trilogy of tragedies.

The discovery is an Oxyrhynchus papyrus, one of the several thousand ancient manuscripts discovered by Grenfell and Hunt in their excavations for the Egypt Exploration Fund

conducted at Behnesa, on the Bahr-Yusuf, or Joseph's Canal, the site of the ancient Oxyrhynchus, from which these invaluable palaeographic remains derive their name of Oxyrhynchus papyri. Dr. A. S. Hunt has described the "find" at a meeting of the Fund in London, Lord Cromer presiding.

Four years ago the Fund was indebted to Oxyrhynchus for extensive remains of a lost tragedy of Euripides, the "Hypsipyle." Then came the turn of Sophocles; and most fortunately the discovery represented a side of the poet concerning which the modern world had been very much in the dark. It was customary to produce tragedies in trilogies, or sets of three, which were followed by a Satyric drama, a lighter piece in which the chorus consisted of Satyrs and the high tension of the preceding tragedies was relaxed. Only one specimen of such a Satyric drama, the "Cyclops" of Euripides, was known to scholars. Of the work of Sophocles, as of Aeschylus, in this line there had existed only short disjointed fragments preserved in citations by grammarians and others.

The new Sophocles fragment is sufficient to be considered a fair sample of his work in the Satyric drama. When found, the papyrus was, as usual, much broken up; in fact, the various fragments were not all obtained in the same year. But they fitted together remarkably well, and as now arranged they make up the first sixteen columns of the play, accounting for over 400 lines, of which about one-half are complete or easily completed and many more sufficiently well preserved to be intelligible. Since the length of a Satyric drama was considerably less than that of the ordinary tragedy, the amount re-

covered well represents as much as half of the original whole. The play is the "Ichneutae," or "The Trackers," of which practically nothing beyond the title was previously known. It is based upon the familiar myth of the exploits of the infant god Hermes—his theft of Apollo's cattle and his invention of the lyre.

Apollo, in an opening speech, announces the loss of the cattle for which he has vainly sought, and offers rewards to the finder. Silenus then appears with his attendant Satyrs and proposes to join in the search. Encouraged by Silenus the chorus starts out on the quest—they are the "Trackers" from whom the play is named. They soon discover traces of the cattle, leading to the entrance of the cave; but here they are alarmed by curious sounds which they do not understand—the notes of the newly invented lyre with which Hermes is amusing himself down below.

Silens upbraids them for their timidity, and at length himself knocks at the barrier and a nymph emerges. In answer to their questions she explains that she is the nurse of the child who has been lately born to Zeus, and whose abnormal growth has been so startling. She tells them of his invention of the lyre, but stoutly defends him against the imputation of being concerned in the theft. They remain unconvinced, however. Some cowhide, admittedly has been used in making the lyre, and there are the telltale tracks on the ground. While the dispute is in progress Apollo returns and accepts the evidence offered by Silenus and the Satyrs as entitling them to the promised reward.

Here the papyrus breaks off; no doubt in the sequel Hermes appears on the scene and appeases Apollo by the gift of the lyre, as narrated in the Homeric hymn. The piece, like the "Cyclops" of Euripides, is a short and simple dramatization of a well known story to which a Satyric setting is appropriate. An element of comedy is supplied by the grotesque figures of Silenus and the chorus, whose imitation of dogs upon the scent lends itself to some rather broad humor. While bearing the unmistakable Sophoclean stamp, the play differs entirely in theme and treatment from the other plays of Sophocles which we possess, and it fills up a gap in our knowledge of the dramatist's art.

Oddly enough, because so appropriate, there was found at the same time and place a papyrus containing a biography of Euripides by Satyrus, a philosopher and historian who flourished in the second century B. C., and who is known to have composed various biographies, among them those of Philip of Macedon and Demosthenes. This papyrus, which is of considerable compass, is valuable both in regard to Satyrus and to Euripides. Of the former as a writer and biographer some idea can now be formed.

The most remarkable thing about this treatise is its form, that of a dialogue; and Satyrus turns out to have been much less of the dry grammarian than might have been imagined. It is also interesting to find that he was directly or indirectly one of the sources of the anonymous extant life of Euripides. From this it is not unsafe to conjecture that the similar lives of Aeschylus and Sophocles also depend to some extent on

his authority. Concerning Euripides, some addition is made to our existing information; and there are several quotations from lost plays.

The papyri, when discovered looked like little more than refuse. Some were in rolls perhaps fourteen inches in length and a couple of inches broad, and were not unlike huge old cigars, dry, dusty and weevil eaten, flattened out by a heavy weight. But when dampened and opened they assumed at once a most interesting appearance; and when cleaned and pressed they resembled pieces of fine yellow matting, not a bright yellow but rather of dark brownish hue. What struck one most strongly was the ink. These leaves, dug out of the soil, had been lying unprotected for 1,800 years, yet where the surface of the papyrus was uninjured, the ink remained as black as if it had only just flowed from the pen.

Thus the earth, unvexed for centuries, yields up to the scholar treasures of literature more precious than the mines of Solomon.